



DOWNTOWN IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY

VII

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Downtown Lowell is well positioned to continue the revitalization started a quarter of a century ago. The recommendations in this Master Plan seek to build upon successes from the past and present day in order to help foster a thriving Downtown Lowell in the long term.

While the recommendations have been presented in a number of categories, all revitalization elements are interrelated. Strategies to stabilize the housing stock will strengthen the retail base. Efforts to improve the public realm will support the success of Downtown Lowell retailers, etc. The end result will be an environment conducive to all types of activity.



Holiday lights around City Hall during the annual City of Lights festival and parade

Photo: Higgins & Ross



Boarding House Park during the Lowell Folk Festival

Photo: Higgins & Ross

Guiding Principles

As the elements of this Master Plan are laid out, it is important to note certain guiding principles that will direct the approach to solving issues identified in this Master Plan. All recommendations should keep in focus the need for long term strategies, multi-project approaches, setting priorities and attention to detail.

Long-Term Strategies

The revitalization that Downtown Lowell has experienced has not happened overnight, and it would be unreasonable to anticipate that “quick-fixes” can stimulate continued success. Instead, revitalization must occur through a long-term strategy, fulfilling a community-based vision for Downtown Lowell.

Multi-Project Approach

While the Tsongas Arena and the National Historical Park have had a significant impact on Downtown Lowell, no one project can change the fortunes of Downtown Lowell. A multifaceted approach, incorporating many interrelated revitalization elements, will allow Downtown Lowell to prosper.

Setting Priorities

To be a success, revitalization must leverage all available resources in the community. With cooperation from the public, private and nonprofit realms, priorities can be identified and addressed uniformly in the face of scarce resources.

Attention to Detail

Often times, many small improvements can yield greater results than one large change. For instance, regular clean up of the alleyways, proper maintenance of street trees and the addition of hanging flower baskets incrementally change the experience of Downtown Lowell patrons, at a relatively low cost. Similar, low-cost, improvements to details should continually be explored.

Office Development Strategy

While this Master Plan states a preference for new residential development over other uses, certain buildings within Downtown Lowell appear well suited for further development as office space. The long-term demand for office space is expected to be strong. Office buildings, such as the Boott Cotton Mills, are poised to create significant new activity centers in Downtown Lowell.

Other efforts to improve the overall health of the Downtown Lowell economy will create an environment attractive to office tenants. These include enhancements to the public realm, renovations of other abandoned buildings into housing units, and continuation of the current marketing efforts. These issues will be discussed later in this chapter. Specific initiatives to support the development of office space include advocating revisions to the current state building code, increasing the supply of parking and connecting office buildings to high capacity telecommunications infrastructure.

Advocate for “Preservation-Friendly” Building Codes

Current efforts are underway statewide to adopt a rehabilitation code similar to New Jersey’s or develop code exceptions that address historic properties in a sensitive manner above and beyond current exceptions. The City should work with Lowell Historic Board, National Park Service, Massachusetts Historical Commission, American Institute of Architects, and other local and state partners to amend the State Building Code’s provisions for historic properties (780 CMR 3409.0). Specifically, exceptions currently available for “totally preserved” buildings need to be extended to “partially preserved” buildings. Changes and clarifications to the Code’s definitional section would be needed as would the expansion of specific exceptions that would apply to designated “partially preserved” structures. This strategy would lower development costs for any historic building, including those converted to housing or other uses.

Increase the Supply of Parking

Notwithstanding the financial feasibility of office development, the availability of parking is the most apparent limiting factor facing developers of office space in Downtown Lowell. While the parking survey prepared as part of this plan identifies an equilibrium between supply and demand today, future large scale development of office space will require the construction of new structured parking facilities. Strategies for funding the construction of new garages has been provided in the Parking section of this chapter.



The Cherry Webb & Touraine building at the corner of John and Merrimack Street was restored in 1998

Photo:DPD

Wire-Up Downtown Lowell Office Buildings

The importance of adequate telecommunications infrastructure to office tenants cannot be underestimated. Every building within Downtown Lowell, especially those which contain or have the potential to contain office tenants, must have access to high-speed telecommunications infrastructure. Specific initiatives include:

- Inventory the bandwidth capacity throughout Downtown Lowell and identify gaps in service
- Identify telecommunications companies that currently serve Downtown Lowell and encourage as many telecommunication providers as possible to lay fiber optic telecommunication lines throughout Lowell. This should increase competition and lower the cost of bandwidth for companies located in Downtown Lowell.
- The City of Lowell should also consider installing underground conduit wherever and whenever streets are opened during street and sidewalk reconstruction. This would allow telecommunication providers with a low-cost means of laying fiber optics within Downtown Lowell.
- Establish a City ordinance that requires all telecommunications providers to be notified of any street opening permits issued within the Downtown. This would provide telecommunication providers with the opportunity to lay new conduit and fiber optic lines at a lower cost.

Retail Enhancement Strategy

In the long-term, a successful retail economy will depend upon improvements to shopping experience (e.g. public realm improvements, better parking, more and better shops and restaurants) and expansion of the market area served by Downtown Lowell. Sustained marketing and promotional efforts and the development of more housing and office space within Downtown Lowell are two very different ways of expanding the market that Downtown Lowell retailers serve.

Improve the Shopping Experience

In order to thrive and attract more shoppers, Downtown Lowell must strive to become an attractive alternative to shopping malls and strip plazas, which compete for the same customer. Downtown Lowell should aim to provide higher levels of customer service and a mix of goods and services that cannot be found at the regional mall. However, Downtown Lowell must provide the same levels of service found in competing shopping areas, in terms of parking convenience and appearance of the common areas. Building the capacity of existing businesses is favored in the short term, utilizing technical assistance and joint promotion coordination. Recruitment of new businesses that can broaden the mix of goods and services found in Downtown Lowell is also recommended. Initiatives to improve parking facilities and the public realm are discussed in subsequent sections of this Master Plan.

Assist Existing Retailers

If Downtown Lowell hopes to carve out a successful niche in today's competitive retail climate, its stores must display the same quality of appearance as stores in malls and other competing downtown locations. Store owners should be encouraged to maintain a professional appearance, including:

- up-to-date merchandise and displays;
- adequate interior light levels and comfortable climates during warm and cool seasons;
- quality window displays, changed at least every three weeks, with window display lighting left on until at least 10:00 P.M., seven days per week, and
- business signs which are of high quality and which amplify the architectural character of Downtown buildings.

In addition, a number of independently-owned stores may improve their outlook with basic advice in the areas of marketing, accounting and business management. Resources such as the Lowell Small Business Assistance Center should be better marketed to Down-



The Welles Emporium: A shopping mainstay on Merrimack Street

Photo: DPD



Fortunato's Restaurant with inviting sidewalk seating, a new addition to Lowell's dining scene.

Photo: Guin Moyle-DPD

town Lowell retailers. Also, the creation of a peer mentoring program could help business owners learn from each other. Subsidizing the cost of retail and merchandising consultants could help retailers gain access to expertise available to large chain retailers.

Retail Recruitment Program

The City of Lowell and its partners must take control of Downtown Lowell's destiny. They must become proactive in attracting new retailers to fill market segments not currently being supplied by retailers in Downtown Lowell. All stakeholders, including existing retailers and property owners should be part of the process of attracting new, quality retailers to Downtown Lowell.

Targets

There are a number of retail types that are in short supply or are missing entirely in Downtown Lowell. The analyses conducted as part of this Master Plan identified growth potential for:

- Restaurants;
- Household furnishings & equipment;;
- Apparel

Consistent with this analysis, the 1998 Downtown Lowell Retail Plan prepared by Todreas Hanley and Associates recommended targeting the following specific retail concepts:

- Restaurants, including ethnic restaurants
- Specialty food stores i.e., ethnic foods or health food
- Shoe stores
- Apparel stores
- Art galleries
- Antique stores
- Coffeehouses offering entertainment
- Office supplies
- Bed, bath, and kitchen accessories

While the above noted businesses are initial targets, any type of business which has been identified as appropriate for Downtown Lowell, that shows an interest in locating in Downtown Lowell, and would raise the level of retail quality and variety in Downtown Lowell should be extended assistance in finding appropriate building space in the Downtown Core. A new retail analysis should be conducted every three years, in order to accurately identify changes in the market and to fine tune recommendations made in this Master Plan.

Prepare Available Space

Every effort should be made to engage the local real estate community in the business attraction effort. The intent of this is to encourage the full participation of the real estate community in focusing on and identifying appropriate prospects, placing prospects in targeted properties, and in obtaining the cooperation of property owners. This can be facilitated by the hosting of a meeting with agents and building owners to discuss recruitment goals and how groups can work together to effectively fill space with appropriate businesses. Regular follow up contact should occur. Building owners can also help by ensuring that vacant space is well lit, well kept and ready to be shown to prospects.

Offer Incentives

Funding for the Downtown Venture fund should be sustained. In its first year of implementation, this low interest loan pool has assisted five new retail and restaurant concepts to get off the ground. The Fund has helped interesting and diverse ventures find homes within the Downtown Core. Lowering the start-up costs for retail entrepreneurs should be a consistent objective of this Downtown improvement strategy.

To date, the Fund has generated enough interest to provide the LDFC with a number of quality ventures from which to choose to fund. In the future, it may prove desirable to market the program to a wider audience of entrepreneurs. Expanding the pool of potential applicants will ensure that the City and the LDFC fund concepts that best augment the current retail mix.

Prospecting for Businesses

In the recent past, the City of Lowell hired professional retail recruiters to market Downtown Lowell to prospects. This approach proved to be costly and largely unsuccessful. A different tact should be considered. The City of Lowell should identify prospects for Downtown Lowell using the following “inside-out” approach.

1. **Expand Existing Businesses** - Existing, successful Downtown business owners should be worked with throughout the recruitment process. These owners should be



Central Fire House - a prime retail space in the Downtown Core currently available for lease.

Photo: Guin Moyle-DPD

given the first chance to provide merchandise and services identified as a need. Existing business owners could provide these goods and services either by expanding merchandise lines or services offered in their current locations or by opening additional businesses in Downtown Lowell. This form of business development is very cost effective since it normally requires minimum time and expense on the part of staff. In addition, current Downtown business owners are familiar with the market and should be in the best position to respond to identified market needs.

2. **Reposition Existing Businesses** - Consideration should be given to encouraging existing businesses to relocate from other portions of Lowell into appropriate space in Downtown. This should be done if relocation would increase their chances of economic success.
3. **Recruit New or Outside Businesses** - Outside business prospects should be sought from within the Lowell area. This entails first identifying existing businesses that (1) are well-managed, (2) are well-capitalized, (3) have a loyal customer base, and (4) are similar to the types of businesses desired in Downtown Lowell.

Once identified, the owners of those businesses should be encouraged to consider opening additional operations in Downtown Lowell — or to relocate within Downtown Lowell — consistent with the process described above. Specific targets should be business owners who have already opened more than one store — these are normally very productive prospects since they have already made the decision to expand on one or more occasions.

These recruitment efforts should be supported by marketing material, both printed and web based, that provides prospects with basic Downtown Lowell market data, information about incentive programs, and other pertinent contact information.

Free Up Additional Spaces for Retailers

No amount of retail recruitment can be effective if viable retail spaces are not available in Downtown Lowell. Underutilized spaces and institutional uses occupying first floor spaces dilute emerging clusters of retail activity. Also, larger spaces are in short supply. Retailers with larger space requirements can augment the mix of boutique retailers and enhance the breadth and quality of retail activity. Specific initiatives to create more spaces for retail tenants include:

1. **Limit the types of uses on the ground floors of Downtown Lowell buildings** - The zoning code should be changed to discourage uses that do not create street level activity from occupying the limited amount of storefront space in Downtown Lowell. Office, institutional and residential uses should be excluded from utilizing first floor,



Chantilly Place, an attractive bridal shop on Merrimack Street

Photo: DPD

traditionally retail storefronts in the Downtown Core. This type of “vertical zoning” has been used to successfully preserve opportunities for retailers and therefore maintain foot traffic on the sidewalks of Downtown Chicago and Mystic, Connecticut.

2. **Implement a City policy of preferring the lease of upper floor spaces for City administrative offices** - The City of Lowell has the unique ability to preserve retail storefronts by establishing a policy whereby City agencies should first seek space on the upper floors of Downtown Lowell buildings. Institutional uses located on the street level create “dead zones” and generally do not enhance the retail mix in Downtown Lowell. In the recent past, the City has leased large portions of first floor retail space for administrative offices for the Health Department, the School Department as well as the temporary home of the Pollard Memorial Library. In each case, the office could have been accommodated easily with available upper-story space. Preferences for upper story space should be outlined in any Requests for Proposals seeking office space issued by the City. The City could also require the same consideration from State and Federal agencies seeking space in Downtown Lowell. The same policy could be instituted for nonprofit agencies and non-retail businesses receiving assistance (CDBG, etc.) from the City.
3. **Encourage opportunities for larger retailers as part of new development projects** - The Downtown Lowell retail market could benefit from the addition of medium and large retail operations. It would likely be difficult, and perhaps undesirable, for “big box” retailers to be accommodated on sites in Downtown Lowell. However, creating opportunities for medium-sized retailers with space requirements between 5,000 and 40,000 sq. ft. could enhance the current mix of retailers. New opportunities could be created as part of the larger development projects on the waterfront and on the bottom floors of parking garages.



Middle Street, the heart of the Downtown Lowell Artist District, has retail potential for specialty retailers

Photo: Guin Moyle-DPD



Father John's Medicine building, a subsidized housing complex subject to an expiring use mortgage

Photo: Guin Moyle - DPD

Downtown Housing Strategy

Major goals of this plan include making Downtown Lowell a vibrant 24-hour community and creating new and more diversified opportunities for housing in the downtown neighborhood. These goals work hand in hand. In order to expand the hours of activity and retail/entertainment opportunities in Downtown Lowell, the market needs to be expanded to justify evening and weekend hours of operation and the opening of additional residential and entertainment venues. An important step in this process is the creation of more market rate housing units, which can increase the median income of Downtown Lowell residents. This will develop a local population with enough discretionary income to patronize restaurants and extended hours for retail and service businesses.

To best achieve these goals, a two-part strategy is recommended. This strategy includes (1) identify and critically assess all sites with the potential to support housing, particularly market rate housing, and (2) actively market viable projects and anticipate unique development opportunities.

Identify and Assess Potential Sites for New Housing

A thorough review of all of the available opportunities for constructing, renovating, and reprogramming residential uses in Downtown Lowell needs to be conducted. This study should look at each potential project, including existing condominium housing like Canal Place I and II and the Ayer Lofts, existing subsidized housing like the Sun Building and the Father John's Medicine building, and opportunities for the reuse of vacant buildings like Canal Place III and portions of the Boott Cotton Mills and Massachusetts Mills. In each case, the development costs should be realistically projected and the assets and impediments to development should be documented. Once this data is analyzed, these properties and potential projects should be catalogued into groups based on their realistic development potential with and without subsidy.

Market viable projects and anticipate unique opportunities

With this study in hand, projects that come forward or are marketed to developers can be appropriately packaged according to the study data to help achieve the following housing objectives:

- Increase the median income of the downtown residential population by increasing the proportion of market-rate housing units relative to subsidized units.
- Promote residential reuse of vacant mill buildings.
- Encourage the development of additional artist live-work space.

- Create no net loss of subsidized housing units in the Downtown, so that no current population is displaced from the neighborhood.
- Encourage the redevelopment of all vacant buildings to be done without subsidy wherever possible.
- Allow Federally and State subsidized housing to expire where the project can feasibly be converted to market rate housing and an alternative project can be completed to maintain the total number of subsidized units.
- Encourage mixed income developments to discourage concentrations of low-income populations.
- Replace expiring use units that are converted to market rate units by actively attaching subsidies to projects that are not feasible without subsidy but might be possible with government assistance.
- Give existing downtown residents who are subject to expiring use agreements priority in occupying any newly created subsidized units.

Property owners should be contacted on a regular basis in order to anticipate particular buildings which may come to market or be converted from subsidized to market rate units, for example.

Evaluating each site rigorously will also identify which sites need subsidies. In particular, sites appropriate for market rate housing may require additional incentives to stimulate development. The City must identify new funding sources that could be used to subsidize the development of market rate units, including:

- **Tax Increment Financing** - The City could explore petitioning the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to change the Economic Development Incentive Program to allow the application of Tax Increment Financing to housing development. Reducing the taxes on property converted to housing could provide the additional subsidy necessary for projects on the verge of moving forward.
- **Community Preservation Act Funds** - The Community Preservation Act (CPA), which went into effect last December, allows cities and towns to ask voters to institute a property tax surcharge of up to 3 percent to fund open space acquisition as well as affordable housing and historic preservation projects. A local Community Preservation Commission would decide how to distribute CPA funds locally. A mixed-income housing redevelopment of a textile mill could receive a healthy subsidy from the CPA Fund.

Canal Place / Market Mills

As an example, if the use agreement for the Market Mills complex expires, 230 units could be converted from subsidized to market rate units. The proximity to the Leo Roy Garage and the successful Canal Place I & II projects suggests that this would be a viable location for market-rate housing. A portion of these units might be allowed to be converted to market-rate and a portion might be preserved as affordable through state efforts to support expiring use leases beyond the term of the existing agreements. At the same time, subsidizing the rehabilitation of the nearby Canal Place III building, which has proven economically challenging to renovate without subsidy, could create enough units in a comparable location to balance those converted to market-rate at Market Mills.

This course of events would meet many of the goals listed above by rehabilitating a vacant building, while increasing the overall population and diversity of income levels in the downtown without losing any affordable units or forcing people to move from the downtown neighborhood.



Future Artists' Housing on Dutton Street

Photo: DPD

Cities and towns that adopt the CPA receive matching funds from a \$25 million state fund established by new fees on property transactions. The matching grants would range from 5 to 100 percent of the amount raised locally by the property tax surcharge.

Attract Artists to Live and Work in Downtown Lowell

The city appears to be well positioned to attract more artists to live and work in Downtown Lowell. An artist colony can create a uniqueness to a place that can foster additional development interest. A growing community of artists can also help to enhance cultural programming already underway in Lowell and can be a stimulus for additional development of market rate housing opportunities. Because of these benefits, additional specific initiatives to attract artists should be considered, including:

- **Incentives** - Small grants, similar to what is offered to first-time home buyers, should be considered to encourage the development of artist housing.
- **Direct marketing** - Downtown Lowell should consider recruiting artists facing relocation due to high real estate costs and other development pressures in Boston and other places.
- **Create a strong and vibrant art and culture organization** - With the current precarious condition of the Lowell Office of Cultural Affairs, it is critical to foster the reorganization of LOCA or the creation of a new arts and culture organization for Lowell. This group will provide a voice for the art community, help organize artists into cooperative groups for the purpose redeveloping Downtown Lowell buildings and manage the flow of information about the arts and cultural events in Downtown Lowell.
- **Create more display venues for local artists** - The encouragement of new art galleries in Downtown Lowell as well as the establishment of a Museum of Contemporary Art should be considered to provide venues for artists to display, showcase and sell their art. The space previously occupied by the New England Sports Museum on Shattuck Street, the Assets Building Complex next to Canal Place and the printing facilities soon to be vacated by the Lowell Sun Publishing Company on Prescott Street are possible sites for such a museum.

Circulation Improvement Strategy

The City's traffic engineering consultant, Pennoni Associates, recommend a number of changes to the traffic control system, roadways lane configurations and pedestrian facilities. These changes are proposed to make the roadways and traffic patterns of Downtown Lowell more predictable and safer for both pedestrians and motorists. A number of these recommendations are relatively low cost and involve modifications to the existing traffic control infrastructure.

Maintain Existing One-way Traffic Flow

After careful consideration of the traffic data, physical limitations of the Downtown Core and community input, it is recommended that the current traffic pattern in Downtown Lowell be sustained. A well-designed one-way roadway system enables full access to adjacent land uses (such as the commercial businesses within the Downtown area) while minimizing conflict points at intersections. In addition, one-way traffic flow contributes positively to predicting routes of emergency vehicles for preemption actuation.

Improve Signalization and Coordination

The results of the analyses indicate that the traffic flow through Downtown Lowell, particularly along Central Street and Merrimack Street can be greatly improved through traffic signal timing and coordination modifications. The following tasks are recommended to achieve greater circulation efficiency:

- **Recalculate the change and clearance times (yellow and all red) at many of the intersections** - By providing the appropriate all-red times at the signalized intersections (especially wide intersections) vehicle and pedestrian safety can be improved. A safer intersection would allow vehicles and pedestrians the opportunity to clear the intersection before the conflicting traffic is released.
- **Signalize the intersection of Market Street and Shattuck Street** - The analyses conducted by Pennoni Associates show a failing level of service for the stopped approach at a number of intersections during peak hours of operation. However, only the Market Street and Shattuck Street intersection meets one or more of the requirements for consideration of installing a traffic signal.

The remaining intersections are recommended to remain stop controlled and be re-evaluated periodically for signal warrants. Despite failing service levels during the peak hours, a traffic signal may have a detrimental effect on the operation of the intersection because of the effects of the surrounding signalized intersections.



One-way traffic pattern on Merrimack Street

Photo: DPD



The wide sidewalk on Merrimack Street promotes pedestrian activity

Photo: DPD



Pedestrians on Merrimack Street

Photo: Sandra Swaile

- **Install traffic control technology that can automatically gauge the need to change the light from red to green** - Conventional inductance loop detectors can be used on standard asphalt and concrete surfaces and video detection or non-invasive microloops can be used at the traffic signals with cobblestone streets so that green time can be provided based on the vehicle demand of the intersections. During off-peak hours, this will improve the response time to waiting motorists and reduce any unused time that is consistent with pre-timed traffic signal operation.
- **Install Advance Detection Systems** - It is also apparent that emergency peremption is an important consideration in the Downtown area due to congestion along signalized approaches. In order to provide meaningful operation, we would recommend the consideration of advance detection at several intersections.
- **Optimize the timing and provide coordination settings for the signalized intersections** - The timing of all signals within the study area should be coordinated and grouped into four subsystems: Central Street; Merrimack Street; Dutton Street; and Bridge Street.

Improve Pedestrian Safety

Improved efficiency of automobile traffic should not come at the expense of pedestrian safety. A number of strategies are possible that can improve the pedestrian experience within Downtown Lowell.

- **Install countdown pedestrian signal heads at traffic signals with high pedestrian traffic** - Countdown-type pedestrian signal heads should be installed to inform pedestrians of the seconds that remain for them to cross the intersection.
- **Improve crosswalks** - Longitudinal “ladder” crosswalks should be provided to allow better visibility of the pedestrian crossing to motorists.
- **Consider providing wider sidewalks in areas and curb bump-outs with bollards**- This may prevent the use by trucks of street sections close to corners as delivery zones. This would also reduce the distance for pedestrians to cross the street and improve visibility of and for pedestrians.

Although this recommendation would reduce the supply of the on-street parking, improved management of the on-street parking supply could offset the loss.

Additional strategies to improve the safety and efficiency of pedestrian traffic have been included in later sections of this Master Plan. They include, developing a pedestrian connection between the Downtown Core and the Gallagher Intermodal Transportation Center and a new extension of the Riverwalk towards the Concord River.

Improve Pavement Markings and Signs

The pavement markings at many intersections are faded or missing. Proper pavement markings are crucial to guide motorists through the City of Lowell. The parking areas, lane configuration, and pedestrian crosswalks should be clearly defined by pavement markings and signing. Durable pavement markings should be installed, such as thermoplastic or epoxy, which have better retro-reflectiveness and a longer life expectancy than conventional water based paints.

Improvements should be made to the regulatory signing within the study area, particularly at intersections and on signalized intersection approaches. Primarily, the directional signs that can be improved are one-way signs and overhead advance land use control signs. In addition, consideration should be given to providing signage that outlines the intended Downtown loop (i.e., Dutton Street to Market Street to Central Street to Merrimack Street) This would help prevent motorists that leave the Lowell Connector at Dutton Street from assuming that they can directly access Merrimack Street.

Initiate Regional Traffic Analysis

As the scope of the traffic analysis included with this Master Plan was limited to Downtown Lowell, a regional traffic impact analysis should be commissioned to consider the effects of a number of complex issues and potential long-range solutions. A long-range study, which would incorporate the impacts of Route 3 construction and new development at the Lawrence Manufacturing Mills, the East Merrimack Street/Lower Belvidere corridor and within the JAM and Acre Planning Areas is advocated. Large-scale solutions, such as routing traffic around Downtown Lowell or constructing additional river crossings in Lowell should be investigated.



Lights at the corner of Dutton Street and Broadway, at the edge of Downtown Lowell

Photo:Guin Moyle- DPD

Parking Improvement Strategy

The provision of adequate parking facilities is a critical element of any downtown revitalization effort. Downtown Lowell faces three major issues related to parking: (1) the limited supply of short-term parking may be hindering the retail economy, (2) future development will trigger the need to construct additional parking facilities, and (3) the unkempt condition of existing parking garages detracts from the experience of the patrons of Downtown Lowell. Each issue must be addressed adequately in order to insure long-term success of Downtown Lowell.

Improve Management of On-street Parking

A strategy to restructure the price of parking in Downtown Lowell and more effectively enforce violations will create more opportunities for short-term parking. The parking price structure must discourage employees, business owners and other day-long parkers from occupying on-street metered spaces for long intervals. On-street, metered spaces should be reserved for shoppers and patrons who come to Downtown Lowell to do quick errands. The following strategies are recommended:

- **Increase parking meter rates** - Currently, it is actually cheaper to feed a meter all day on the street than to pay a full-day rate to park in a garage. Increasing the cost of parking on the street so that it is double the cost of parking in a garage will encourage people to use the parking garages.
- **Increase fines for on-street parking violations** - Raising fines to a point where a violation is three times the cost of parking all-day in the garage would provide an additional deterrent.
- **Increase enforcement** - Increasing the enforcement of violators would also discourage on-street parking. Any increase in revenue generated from fines can be used to hire additional meter clerks, thereby improving the capacity to monitor short-term parking.

However, it is important to enforce parking ordinances in a sensitive way. A friendly warning note placed on the car of a first-time offender will generate a positive feeling about Downtown Lowell by visitors and tourists who unexpectedly violated a parking ordinance.

- **Reduce meter time limits in front of critical retail locations** - Reduce the two-hour parking limit at metered spaces to 30 minutes throughout Downtown Lowell. Also, increase the number of metered spaces with a 15 minute limit within the Downtown Core on Merrimack, Market, Middle, and Palmer Street in particular.



Truck making deliveries on Middle Street

Photo: Sandra Swaile

- **Encourage Downtown Lowell business owners to validate public garage parking tickets for shoppers and visitors** - Validation will give patrons one less reason to avoid parking in a garage.

Strive for Excellence in Parking Garage Management

Parking garages should be managed in the most professional manner possible. As a critical piece of the public realm. They should feel safe, be well lit and exceptionally clean. Recommendations that aim to improve the experience of garage patrons include:

- Lighting conditions should be evaluated and improved; broken lights should be replaced immediately.
- Provide better information on the availability of parking within facilities, including signs, brochures and maps. Provide real-time information on the location of available parking spaces through electronic displays that indicate that a garage or particular floor is “full.”
- Improve the perception of garage safety by providing increased visibility of security patrols.
- Dirt and debris should not be tolerated in and around the garage.
- Ticket vending machines, pass card readers and all other equipment should be maintained and updated regularly.
- Include incentives based on cleanliness and security standards when new security and management contracts are negotiated.

These improvements will certainly raise the cost of operating the municipal garages. The City should explore raising parking rates in order to fund these critical improvements in quality. Patrons will likely accept an increase in prices if the parking experience is improved significantly.

Identify Funding for New Parking Garage Construction

In the future, the availability of parking is the most apparent limiting factor facing developers of office space in Downtown Lowell. While the parking survey prepared as part of this Master Plan identifies an equilibrium between supply and demand today, future large-scale developments will require the construction of new, and costly, structured parking facilities. State funding programs that facilitated the construction of off-street parking during the 1980s and early 1990s have disappeared. The high cost of parking garages, with costs ranging from \$12,000 to \$20,000 per space highlights the need for new strategies to



Physical improvements underway at the Leo Roy Garage on Market Street

Photo: Guin Moyle-DPD

fund garages. Two possibilities to generate funding for the construction of new parking facilities include:

- **Tax Increment Financing** - Normally associated with a tax break, a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) agreement could be used to redirect new property tax revenue to fund specific public investments. A portion of the incremental property tax revenue generated by a major building renovation or construction could be captured to make payments on a bond or loan used to fund the construction of a parking garage. Additional funds should be sought from state and federal sources to make up any funding shortfall.
- **Develop a mechanism for developer “payments in lieu of parking”** - The zoning code could be amended to allow developers to subsidize the cost of creating new parking. Under such an ordinance, developments that will increase the demand for parking in Downtown Lowell will be required to provide parking to support their development. This mechanism would allow developers the option of paying a fee if parking could not be obtained on-site or through a lease agreement. The fees collected would go towards financing parking mitigation for the area (i.e. garage development, transit improvements, etc.).



The Ayotte Garage located next to the Tsongas Arena

Photo: DPD

It is recognized that these strategies may not cover the entire cost of constructing a parking garage. Therefore, the City must still rely on state and federal resources for a portion of development costs for off-street, structured parking. The Merrimack Valley Economic Development Council recently began to identify the parking needs of member communities in an effort to lobby the Commonwealth for a special set-aside funding for parking garage projects in the Merrimack Valley. The City of Lowell should encourage these efforts.

Public Realm Improvement Strategy

The City of Lowell has made substantial investments in the quality of the public realm in Downtown Lowell over the past few years. The repaving of a number of Downtown streets, the addition of new street furniture, brighter lighting and further enhancements such as hanging flower planters has played a major role in improving the attractiveness to shoppers, residents and tourists. Almost all of the participants of this planning process view these improvements as positive and necessary.

The condition of the Downtown Lowell public realm, which includes parks, streets, sidewalks, and public parking facilities, plays an important role in creating a feeling of safety and comfort for patrons of the Downtown. These areas are the public face of Downtown Lowell and as such, should be maintained with an attention to detail. A consistent schedule of renewing the physical environment of Downtown Lowell with an exciting and interesting visual experience is necessary to compete with commercial shopping centers that regularly reinvest in common areas.

Improvements to the public realm will reinforce and encourage private investment. The design, implementation, and funding of this strategy is generally assumed to be the responsibility of the City. However, opportunities for cost sharing, perhaps with a newly created Business Improvement District, should be explored. Specific recommendations include:

Continue Schedule of Downtown Streetscape Improvements

Many have commented on the dramatic changes that took place in 1999 when a face lift was given to Merrimack Street, among other streets, during the Phase I of a three-phase improvement plan. New street furniture, lighting and hanging flower baskets improved the image of Downtown Lowell significantly. A high priority must be placed upon continuing these investments at regular intervals, over the long term. A five-phase rotating schedule is outlined in **Table 7.1**. Once Phases II through V are completed, the area renovated during Phase I should be reassessed for Phase VI and new improvements planned. These improvements should be coupled with a plan to maintain the health of street trees along these streets.

Update and Enhance the Directional Signs and Banners

In preparation for the opening of the Tsongas Arena and LeLachur Ballpark in 1998, the City of Lowell added a comprehensive gateway sign system that was designed to make it easier for new visitors to find these venues. A plan should be put in place to periodically update this system to reflect changes to Downtown Lowell activity centers. Also, sign systems should be developed to improve the ability of visitors to navigate within Down-

New Victorian Lights and hanging flower baskets.

Photo: DPD



Table 7.1: Downtown Streetscape Improvement Schedule

| Phase | Years | Streets | Improvements |
|-------|-------|---|--|
| II | 2003 | Market, Middle, Central, Prescott | Repave streets, reset cobble stones, new street furniture, street lights, kiosks, etc. |
| III | 2004 | Warren, Hurd, William, Green, Church, Jackson | Repave streets, new street furniture, street lights, kiosks, etc. |
| IV | 2005 | Dutton (Merrimack to Broadway), Market (Dutton to Cabot), Merrimack (Dutton to Cabot), Worthen, Arcand Dr | Repave streets, reset cobble stones, new street furniture, street lights, kiosks, etc. |
| V | 2006 | East Merrimack Street (Kearney Sq to Fayette) | Repave streets, new street furniture, street lights, kiosks, etc. |
| VI | 2007 | Merrimack, Palmer, Shattuck, Lee, Bridge, John | Repave streets, reassess need for new street furniture, street lights, kiosks, etc. |

town Lowell, particularly to and from parking garages.

A comprehensive and consistent system of light pole banners should be developed that change at least monthly in order to advertise events occurring in Downtown Lowell. Colorful, seasonal banners would be a nice visual element to the streetscape.

Improve Gateways to Downtown Lowell

Gateways are an important means of “setting a tone” and act as the front door to Downtown Lowell. Enhancing these critical gateways with planting and signs welcoming visitors to Downtown Lowell is important. Efforts to soften the hard urban edges should be explored at the intersection of Dutton Street and Thorndike Street, before the John E. Cox Bridge on Bridge Street and on Central Street at Gorham Street. In addition, proper maintenance should occur along all major streets leading to Downtown Lowell, even as far away as the beginning of the Lowell Connector.

Require Appropriate Parking Lot and Street Edge Treatments

Surface lots are not encouraged in this Master Plan. However, for lots where development is still being planned, a reduction of the visual impact of parking lots should be encouraged. Existing regulations in the City of Lowell Zoning Code must be enforced.

Develop New Pedestrian Connections to Downtown Lowell

Two new pedestrian pathways should be developed: an extension of the Riverwalk from the Boott Cotton Mills to the proposed Judicial Complex/Cultural and Performing Arts Center and from Downtown to the Gallagher Intermodal Transportation Center. The Riverwalk extension would allow users to access Massachusetts Mills, the East Merrimack Street campus of Middlesex Community College and a proposed regional system of bike paths and trails. The Gallagher Terminal connection would improve connections for those who utilize commuter rail transportation.

Require Public Use of Riverfront Development

In order to assure ground level activity along the Riverwalk and other areas adjacent to rivers and canals in Downtown Lowell, public uses should be required. New development must take advantage of desirable locations and create spaces for retail, restaurants



Bicyclists riding along the canalway facing Bording House Park

Photo: Guin Moyle

and other public uses. This can be accomplished through changes to the zoning code or requirements outlined when public disposition of development sites occurs.

Clean up Alleyways and Canals

These areas remain a source of neglect. Property owners, abutters, tenants, trash haulers and City code enforcement staff should be engaged to find long-term solutions. Alleyways and canals are a highly visible eyesore at the pedestrian level. Possible solutions include:

- **Establish uniform dumpster regulations** - A city ordinance that sets standards for the size, shape, condition, frequency of pickup and security of trash dumpsters is needed as soon as possible. This combined with outreach efforts and strict enforcement can go a long way towards cleaning the alleys.
- **Remove garbage from canals on a regular basis** - Current efforts to periodically clean the canals, usually once or twice a year are not adequate. Funding must be provided to eliminate this highly visible nuisance.



Dumpsters blocking an alleyway in Downtown Lowell

Photo: Guin Moyle



A summer evening at LeLacheur Park

Photo: Higgins & Ross

Downtown Management

Many have recognized the need for better coordination among Downtown Lowell stakeholders. Particular shortcomings were identified in the areas of joint marketing for retailers, coordination for Downtown Lowell events and promotions and maintenance issues that are not effectively being addressed.

While Lowell has succeeded with such ambitious projects as the construction of Edward LeLacheur Park and Paul E. Tsongas Arena, there is a growing concern that some of the smaller issues are not being addressed effectively. Maintenance issues have arisen, particularly the condition of the alleyways and snow removal on sidewalks. In addition, the Downtown Lowell retail community lacks a consistent identity. Plans to expand the roster of events and promotional efforts will grow more difficult, as generally the same core group of volunteers is relied upon time and time again. Help is required to insure that these items are all addressed.

There is a need for the creation of some type of organizational framework to address these issues and ensure that the basic tenets of this Master Plan are addressed and benchmarked. Although many believe that there are too many groups that exist in Downtown Lowell right now, it would be advantageous to have an organization that could cut across complex issues and current responsibilities to holistically address the ongoing renewal of Downtown Lowell.

Main Street Four Point Approach

It is recommended that the new organization follow the Main Street Four Point Approach advocated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Main Street Approach is a flexible framework for addressing downtown revitalization, and is based on a comprehensive strategy of work grouped in four broad areas:

- **Design** - Enhancing the physical appearance of the commercial district by rehabilitating historic buildings, encouraging supportive new construction, developing sensitive design management systems, and long-term planning.
- **Organization** - Building consensus and cooperation among the many groups and individuals who have a role in the revitalization process.
- **Promotion** - Marketing the traditional commercial district's assets to customers, potential investors, new businesses, local citizens and visitors.
- **Economic Restructuring** - Strengthening the district's existing economic base while finding ways to expand it to meet new opportunities — and challenges from outlying development.

Organizational Structure

A successful organizational framework will rely on a committed group of stakeholders from both the public and private sector working together to ensure that revitalization efforts continue. Three distinct roles are envisioned for the this organization: full-time staff, a volunteer executive board, and volunteers filling positions on subcommittees.

Downtown Lowell could benefit significantly from the addition of a full-time, paid staff to coordinate activities related to the enhancement of Downtown Lowell. This staff would insure that projects move forward on a daily basis. Staff would play a number of roles, including assisting with promotional activities and Downtown Lowell events, engaging Downtown Lowell business and property owners to become part of the solution, conducting periodic inventories of Downtown Lowell's economy, providing technical assistance to retailers and becoming the central point of contact for all business concerns and inquiries about Downtown Lowell. Ideally, paid staff would include a Downtown Manager/Coordinator, Assistant Coordinator and an Administrative Assistant.

A nineteen-member Downtown Executive Board is envisioned to oversee the activities of the staff. The Executive Board would be action-oriented, would meet on a monthly basis and would provide input to the staff and ensure that revitalization efforts continue to move forward. Membership to the Executive Board would be made up of representatives from a variety of Downtown Lowell stakeholders. A suggested roster of representatives in included in **Table 7.2**.

Subcommittees would be organized around each element of the Main Street Four Point Approach. These four subcommittees would meet regularly to flesh out relevant issues, develop and actively implement specific strategies. Subcommittees would bring together existing groups who are currently addressing similar issues and would thereby improve coordination among groups. For example, the Promotion Subcommittee would bring together representative from the existing special events roundtable and retail subcommittee of the LDFC to focus jointly on efforts to involve retailers with special events.

This new organization is not meant to replace existing efforts and initiatives started by existing organizations, but will instead seek to improve coordination and raise the profile of Downtown Lowell. The addition of full-time staff will also build capacity and effectiveness of existing organizations who currently are without full-time staff (e.g. Center City Committee, LOCA).

Table 7.2: Proposed Downtown Lowell Executive Board

| Proposed Stakeholder Group | # of Representatives |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Downtown Property Owners | 3 |
| Downtown Business Owners | 3 |
| Downtown Residents | 3 |
| City of Lowell | 3 |
| Mayor | |
| City Manager | |
| DPD Director | |
| Lowell Development & Financial Corp. | 1 |
| Lowell Plan, Inc. | 1 |
| Downtown Lowell Business Association | 1 |
| National Park Service | 1 |
| Greater Lowell CVB | 1 |
| Lowell Historic Board | 1 |
| College/University Representative | 1 |
| Total Membership | 19 |

Program Funding Options

Two realistic options are available that could provide adequate funding and resources to help jump start this new organization. They include (1) the creation of a City-funded position of Downtown Coordinator/Manager and, (2) the establishment of a new arts organization which could expand its agenda to include more general Downtown revitalization efforts.

The City of Lowell could consider funding the salary of a Downtown Coordinator/Manager and provide administrative space for a Downtown Office within City Hall or other City administrative office locations in the Downtown Core. While an independent Downtown Office is a preferred option so that no one Downtown Lowell stakeholder dominates the revitalization agenda, this option would prove to be the most economical, and would allow the fledgeling Downtown organization time to gain credibility. Other partners could provide in-kind assistance or additional funding to support outreach, marketing and promotion-related expenses.

Alternatively, the new arts and cultural organization replacing LOCA could broaden its agenda to include traditional downtown revitalization issues. Currently, with the precarious financial condition of LOCA, there is no viable arts organization that serves Lowell. This comes at a time when Lowell has been actively marketing an artist district in Downtown Lowell as a living destination for displaced Boston artists.

This Master Plan has acknowledged the contributions the cultural community has had on the success of Downtown Lowell and the potential impact artists can have in the future. The current City budget provides \$50,000 for support of a culture and arts council. This funding could be combined with a City commitment to fund a Downtown Coordinator/Manager. These funds, when combined, could provide a stimulus for further private sector contributions to jump start a new organization to serve the artist community and Downtown Lowell constituents alike. Overhead costs could also be shared. Clearly, overlapping interests shared by the Lowell arts community and the Downtown Lowell stakeholders can become an opportunity to bring added value to Downtown Lowell.

Business Improvement District (BID)

A Business Improvement District (BID) is a method used to finance and manage commercial area improvements in designated districts in order to restore or promote business activity. The BID is a specifically designed geographic district established to provide additional and supplemental services such as business retention and recruitment, professional management, marketing, improved maintenance, enhanced safety and security, and physical improvements to the streetscape of the district. The BID is financed by property

owners within the district who agree to an additional assessment to their real estate property taxes, which is then exclusively dedicated for improvements that will benefit the entire district. The municipality collects the assessed funds and provides them to the BID, which directs them to enhanced or additional services, which are not traditionally offered by the municipality. The funds from a BID are used only to supplement municipal services and are not permitted to replace those existing services.

There are three primary advantages of a BID. The first is the ability to provide additional and enhanced services that improve the business environment. The second advantage is the capability of professional management of retail and commercial services, much like those offered in a mall, that enhance the district and strengthen a municipality's economic capacity. The third primary advantage is the predictable and reliable source of funding that a BID offers.

The Master Plan Citizen Advisory Committee extensively discussed the possibility of creating a BID for Downtown Lowell to achieve many of the objectives of this Master Plan. Not everyone agreed that it was a realistic option for addressing Downtown Lowell issues. Many feared that an "opt-out" clause included in the legislation—that allows any building owner to remove his or her property from BID fees—would stymie any effort to organize a BID. After much discussion, it was agreed that for a BID to be established, a considerable grassroots effort led by the business and property owners was required.

Currently, it appears that a BID is not necessary to enable most of the recommendations in this Master Plan to be realized. In the past, the City of Lowell has taken the considerable responsibility of funding capital enhancements to Downtown Lowell streets and sidewalks. Private sector stakeholders have joined together to create attractive incentives for start-up businesses and fund significant marketing efforts. Identifying a problem that could only be solved with funding generated by a BID is difficult. Of course, if past contributions from the private sector or the City are no longer possible, or if new initiatives would require BID funding, serious consideration should be given toward establishing a BID.

Summary of Recommendations

- Identify funding and resources to establish a Downtown Coordinator;
- Recruit an action oriented Executive Board; hire a Downtown Coordinator/Manager;
- Build the credibility of the new Downtown Organization;
- Consider establishing a BID if current funding resources are exhausted.

BID Basics

BIDs allow for the organized and professional implementation of competitive business practices and services developed and maintained cooperatively at the local level.

In Massachusetts, a BID can be formed in any geographical area in which at least 75% of the land is zoned or used for commercial, retail, industrial or mixed uses.

The BID concept of private assessment for common improvements is not unlike a betterment district where property owners pay for specific utility benefits. It has also been compared to the common charges assessed to all shopping mall tenants, which are used for maintenance, security, and promotions. A BID can provide all of these services to compete more equitably with shopping malls.

